

# "We're not gay; we're just foreign!"

## *Desi Drags, Disidentifications and Activist Film in New York*

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*This piece considers a moment of South Asian queer cultural production in the diaspora, specifically the activist film "Julpari" made in New York City. The documentary, produced for the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association (SALGA) by Khuragai Productions, follows a group of South Asian urban immigrant male drag queens as they build community, practice drag and complicate what it means to be an immigrant and queer in New York City. My work draws on the writings of performance theorist José Esteban Muñoz to consider the disidentificatory tactics these men employ in their everyday lives. Disidentifications elaborates on the quotidian survival strategies minority subjects use in order to navigate mainstream white and gay culture. Through an analysis of films, scholars can analyze how questions of belonging and desire are complicated for queer immigrant subjects who must consider how their non-normative desire and practices are imbricated with their identities as diasporic national subjects.*

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"Drag is not about life. It's about being larger than life. Always. ... Hence, the eight inch heels!"  
Faraz Ahmed in *Julpari*, Khuragai Productions

"Nina Chiffon," a.k.a. Faraz Ahmed, is a Muslim queer immigrant drag queen in New York City relocated from Pakistan. We first see her alone on a subway platform late at night, colorfully adorned in a green and pink sari, a tight black wig, and eight-inch heels to accentuate her already commanding height. Like any good New Yorker, she waits impatiently for the next subway train, her wig blowing gently in the wind. As the train approaches, Nina Chiffon scoops up her silk sari and disappears onto the train in an instant. Thus begins *Julpari*, a short documentary

produced by and for the South Asian Lesbian Gay Association (SALGA) in 1996. The film introduces us to Faraz Ahmed and his two queer desi<sup>1</sup> roommates Saleem and Saeed – who together call themselves a happy household of women. They are artists, performers and faithful members of SALGA – one of the most prominent South Asian queer organizations in New York City. *Julpari* features these South Asian queer men who speak openly about their lives – discussing, among other things: drag, family, belonging, and the politics of being queer and South Asian in America.

Swati Khurana and Leith Murgai, who together produced the short film, offer a valuable glance into a subcultural world easily marginalized within mainstream racist, heterosexist discourse and

representation. By affirming "a queer desi diasporic" social location, I argue these men complicate the various dominant accounts and existing assumptions surrounding mainstream queer and South Asian American identities. Through their recorded interviews and playful enactments of drag performance in *Julpari*, these subjects contest and subvert (even if temporarily) the hegemonic supremacy of heterosexuality and whiteness that has historically colluded to elide their existence.<sup>2</sup> While arguing that *Julpari* productively challenges representations of queerness and "South Asianness" throughout the film, this paper also exposes some of the contradictions and potentially conservative reinscriptions present in the film.<sup>3</sup> Ideally, these critiques will help sketch the politics of progressive

South Asian queer diasporic performance—a politics that speaks to the ways South Asian diasporic queers negotiate the specific and complex intersections of racial, gender and sexual power dynamics ordering their lives in contradictory ways.

Central to this effort is an acknowledgment that South Asian diasporic queer subjectivities enact contradictory politics. U.S. South Asian queers are not celebrated, exoticized or victimized in my reading of *Julpari* because I understand subjectivity to be complex and mediated through uneven relations of power. Thus, these individuals present both challenges and reinforcements to dominant understandings of desire, belonging, and citizenship. Throughout this analysis, I want to remind the reader of the history of “conservative impulses” within South Asian migrant communities in order to better contextualize the subcultural queer practices featured in the film. For instance, the continued pursuits of model minority status, upward technocratic/professional mobility, a lack of political organizing with other communities of color around affirmative action (only partially reconsidered post-9/11), and a history of generally privileged immigration for South Asian professionals to the US in the late twentieth century all complicate a critical reading of *Julpari*.<sup>4</sup> In addition, one can argue that entrenched heteronormativity and religious fundamentalism paralyze sections of the South Asian American community and aggressively police the expression of non-normative sexuality and desire. At the same time, however, the past fifteen to twenty years has seen a remarkable surge in progressive South Asian queer diasporic organizing—including organizations like SALGA and activist

films like *Julpari*.<sup>5</sup> I read this film in relation to both the “conservative impulses” and progressive activist histories within the larger South Asian diasporic community to illustrate how the conditions of diaspora and displacement, more generally, are not necessarily producing progressive (or neat) alternatives to static conceptions of “South Asian culture.”

The following discussion investigates how the reproduction of dominant power relations develops in the film. I argue that *Julpari* and like forms of South Asian queer cultural production serve as a useful strategy of cultural criticism. These performances promptly intervene into the legacies of patriarchy, homophobia and fundamentalist nationalism attributed to the South Asian diasporic community. By sifting through both the transgressive and reactionary moments encoded in these works, one can enact a progressive politics steeped in feminist visions and queer perspectives on diasporic citizenship and belonging. What lies ahead is therefore an extended reading of specific moments in *Julpari* that deconstructs how these South Asian queers disidentify through drag and occupy space – subverting and inflecting dominant narratives of both queerness and South Asian migrant identity while also potentially exacerbating preexisting stereotypes.

*Julpari* begins with Faraz Ahmed, dressed in black, speaking to a camera that zooms into a close-up of his lightly powdered face.<sup>6</sup> We meet Faraz in mid-critique of the mainstream gay and lesbian community (read: white queers). He mentions that “being gay” is not just “that white buff pretty boy image” propagated by the media, asserting that being a person of color makes him more conscious of the racism

polarizing the queer community at large. Faraz’s statement underscores the claim that South Asians and other third world migrants and people of color must protest their removal from queer representation – even by other queers. Faraz considers this dismissal “a crime” – shocked that other queers who have personally experienced dehumanizing discrimination at the hands of a homophobic populace would sanction further oppression. Clear from the start of *Julpari* is the fact that the directors were interested in portraying the friction existing between South Asian queers and the mainstream white queer community. They do so by centering on a migrant subcultural community that, until recently, was invisible in the “gay scene” of New York City - focusing exclusively on South Asian immigrant queers.

Later, the film documents SALGA’s mini-vacation to a “Jewish village,” of sorts. Saleem, Faraz’s roommate, announces: “the whole SALGA gang was there” and ready to shock the townspeople by going out shopping “dressed in drag.” One SALGA member, in response to the general alarm with which the whites greeted the South Asian queers, approached the camera and said: “We’re not queer; we’re just foreigners!” His statement lightly-heartedly riffs on the ironic and multiple positionality of the ‘perpetually foreign’ South Asian queer migrant who must simultaneously negotiate both the racism and the homophobia of the dominant population.

In order to further unpack this humorous political negotiation, I draw upon José Esteban Muñoz’s theory of disidentifications, applying it to the diasporic context documented in *Julpari*. As a queer performance theorist, Muñoz is concerned with the

“world-making and world-mapping” potential of queer of color subjects. Muñoz defines disidentification as “descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existences of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (Muñoz 4). His work offers an imaginative and lucid framework to think through the ways desi drag queens both resist and reproduce dominant forms of representation that have absented or maligned their existence. Muñoz theorizes that queer performers of color can reformulate racist and homophobic images and symbols as potent counterhegemonic tools to destabilize power.<sup>7</sup> I argue that *Julpari* depicts non-conformist South Asian diasporic queers’ “survival strategies”—most importantly through their use of drag—to negotiate this hostile public sphere. In fact, such works help minoritarian subjects like desi queers further articulate their collective protests against the racism and homophobia of their communities.

The film expands on its critique of normativity by documenting the lives of South Asian diasporic queer subjects. *Julpari* uses the SALGA retreat to offer its audience glimpses of how South Asian queers, in a sense, reterritorialize “the village.” We see shots of the men dressing up in drag, acting out scenes from their favorite films, cooking together, playing ball outside on the lawn and running through fields hand in hand. One shot focuses specifically on a group of desi men, half naked, standing together under a water hose and waiting gleefully for the flash of a disposable camera to record the moment from the retreat. A water fight breaks out

in the midst of the pose, some of the members fall to the ground, and the ensuing force of the water douses the rest. This image of South Asian queerness has stayed with me long after watching *Julpari*. The ways these desi queer men occupy space together in this upstate New York villa offers an important window into understanding the subcultural practices of the community at large. Since cultural citizenship in the South Asian diasporic context (meaning an “authentic” sense of belonging to the nation or cultural group) is heavily invested in a specific heteronormative model of domesticity and family, *Julpari*’s content signals an important transgression against that norm. The film documents a group of single queer men cuddling, cooking and sharing bonds together—in a sense, re-imagining conceptions of kinship and family outside the constraints of heteronormativity. As one of the SALGA members states in the film, “Family is all about helping each other...I think SALGA fulfills that to a T.” At best, connections to biological families are fraught and dubious for these subjects so it is important to consider how queer groups like SALGA—which alter the phobic landscapes of majoritarian public culture by advocating specifically for South Asian diasporic queers—serve as a meaningful family network. Indeed by claiming the resort village as their own, the SALGA members construct—at least temporarily—an ethnically queer counterpublic space where they can collectively contest the “hegemonic supremacy” of heteronormative family models, as Muñoz’s writing on majoritarian public spheres predicts (Muñoz 1).

Beyond confrontations with ethnicity and public space, these desi drag queens actively ‘queer’

representations of the South Asian diaspora. Saleem talks about how he has been “doing drag since [he] was seven or eight years old.” He recounts a story of preparing for a drag performance as a child when his mother was away from home. Saleem would try on his mother’s saris and then perform for the neighborhood children. When his mother arrived home early, as was often the case, he would simply explain that he was “just having fun, you know, it’s like entertaining.” Central to these men’s narratives seems to be the elation and pleasure they experience in the production and performance of feminine beauty.

However, Faraz complicates that assertion by saying that “drag is not about wanting to be a woman. It is about these exaggerated forms of femininity and masculinity.” I think Muñoz would agree, seeing male to female drag performance as a counteridentification with (meaning: a rejection of) female identities. Faraz extends his view on drag by saying that “it is about being in touch with ‘qualities’ ... not necessarily identified as feminine or masculine ... but qualities that are just ... ‘nice.’” *Julpari* depicts Faraz as wary of gendering his drag work, opting for a more fluid interpretation of gender roles.

Yet while confounding conventional narratives of gender and South Asian diasporic family networks through the very portrayal of non-normative desire, the queer agents in *Julpari* seem simultaneously complicit in the reinscription of a problematic gender binary. For instance, Faraz says “we view each other as sisters. Even though it may be considered misogynistic, we do view ourselves as a household of women.” Although Faraz is conscious of a potential

masculinist reading of his statements, I still question the language he uses to name the experiential bonds he shares with these other desi queer men. I ask, why not a household of desi queer brothers? Or further, “a household of desi queens (non-descript gender)”?

Similarly, when asked to speak about Faraz, Saleem says: “Faraz? ... uh, I don’t know. *She’s* like a wife. *He* cleans the place, and a lot of time *he* cooks. It’s nice after a long day ... I like to eat. I’m like a pig!” (emphasis mine). What is intriguing here is the ways in which Saleem (“the buffed up one” according to Faraz, remember) alternates between pronoun variants to describe his roommate. Also problematic is his patriarchal coding of cooking and cleaning as domestic spheres consigned to “wives,” and thus, women. *Julpari* represents these desi queer males living together and documents the ways they make sense of their so-called “outlawed” existence as South Asian diasporic queers. Yet, their comments surrounding gender strike me as uncritical. Thus, although *Julpari* features South Asian queer diasporic subjectivities, they need not necessarily be politically libratory or more critical of static patriarchies that circulate within the larger diasporic community. Faraz is quick to condemn the white queer community for not witnessing the discrimination they participate in against queers of color, but he seemingly under-investigates his own South Asian male privilege. Missing, then, from *Julpari*, is a feminist critique of domesticity and labor.

While *Julpari* may offer a problematic portrayal of gender, more alarming perhaps is the apparent lack of racial critique in the actual desi drag performances documented in the film. *Julpari* centers on Nina Chiffon (a.k.a. Faraz) dressed as

Marilyn Monroe – mole and all – to a host of other feminine vixens, including the vamp Helen! The film crosscuts from images of Faraz as Nina Chiffon performing Marilyn Monroe: luxuriating in a black teddy, smoking a cigarette on a satin settee and seducing the camera to a Nina Chiffon redressed in a dominatrix corset lip-synching to Madonna’s track “Vogue” and Sticky Finger’s song “You Gotta Lick It, Before We Kick It.” In the final moments of the film, we see her redone once more: this time she’s sauntering through the subways of New York City in the green and pink silk sari and heels introduced at the start of this piece, gesturing longingly as if lost in the latest Bollywood film.

A possible concern here is that the high-femme drag performances and conflation of images depicted in *Julpari* elevate an image of beauty defined in terms of an imagined “global American otherness” – where Western feminine beauty aesthetics define the parameters of even South Asian drag performance.<sup>8</sup> This is alarming, of course, because, as this paper affirms, I consider desi drag (and its representation) urgent sites of cultural intervention in dominant homophobic and racist spheres. *Julpari*’s portrayal of desi drag seemed to endorse a white beauty aesthetic in performing femininity. It is worrisome that Faraz and his band of “sisters” were not effectively deploying queer desi performativity to imagine that diasporic queer politics envisioned at the start of this piece.

Muñoz’s disidentification theory fortunately intervenes, lending a more complex interpretation. His text reminds us:

Identification ... is never a simple project. Identifying with an object, person,

lifestyle, history, political ideology, religious orientation, and so on, means also simultaneously and partially counteridentifying, as well as only partially identifying, with different aspects of the social and psychic world. (Muñoz 8)

Extended further, Muñoz’s theory claims that a queer drag queen of color like Nina Chiffon – while counteridentifying with a certain icon/logic – perhaps Marilyn Monroe’s “white high-femme” – cannot escape structures of power and dominance that inevitably locate Chiffon’s South Asian queer male body within the performance and politics of drag. In essence, the drag queen can never imagine herself “outside of ideology” (12) because her body will always be situated against and within that ideology. That said, disidentification offers the drag subject a chance to rework the contradictory components of her identity together (i.e. sexuality, ethnicity, etc.) to both challenge and acknowledge dominant structures of power.

Even Faraz’s drag name – ‘Nina Chiffon’ – can be read through this disidentificatory lens. At first glance, I was disturbed that Faraz’s stage name did not have a “more desi sounding” resonance – like “Faraz Ahmed,” for instance. Upon further observation, however, the queen’s disidentificatory strategy becomes clearer. “Nina” has become a popular South Asian diasporic female name, as many first generation South Asians select baby names more palatable to an English tongue. Second, we realize that “Chiffon” is actually a popular fabric used in South Asian female clothing. Thus, a Pakistani immigrant queer male’s appropriation of the name “Nina Chiffon” highlights the contradictory but creative ways

in which a queer performer of color authenticates this disidentification process within the discursive limits of dominant majoritarian spheres. Furthermore, even Khuragai's film name – *Julpari* – flares with disidentification. “*Julpari*” means “on fire” in Hindi, but has been recoded in desi queer vernacular to signify “flaming.” However, “flaming,” as we know, is a slang word originating in the white queer community – now apparently uprooted, translated, and deployed by South Asian queers in New York! Clearly, desi diasporic drag disidentifications must recycle, as they subvert, the language of both the dominant queer community and the mainstream South Asian community at large in a collective reformulation of identity.

To conclude, I will further emphasize the imperative project that disidentification sets out for the desi drag queens represented in *Julpari*. Muñoz warns:

Let me be clear about one thing: disidentification is about cultural, material, and psychic survival. It is a response to state and global power apparatuses that employ systems of racial, sexual and national subjugation. These routinized protocols of subjugation are brutal and painful. Disidentification is about managing and negotiating historical trauma and systemic violence. ... I have wanted to posit that such processes of self-actualization come into discourse as a response to ideologies that discriminate against, demean, and attempt to destroy components of subjectivity that do not conform or respond to

narratives of universalization and normalization. (161)

Muñoz's commentary reads especially alarming in light of recent increased repression of Arab and South Asian American communities in the U.S. after 9/11 and the continued denial of civil rights to immigrants and queers of all kind further sanctioned by the conservative policies of the federal government.<sup>9</sup> Queers of color are especially vulnerable to these types of authoritarianisms, making works like *Julpari* an explicit resistance to erasure.<sup>10</sup> As survival tactics, then, disidentifications offer South Asian queer subjects a space to examine and enhance their everyday lives. Cultural productions like drag performances often interrogate the complex ways in which queers of color are positioned in dominant culture. Muñoz's foreboding words speak to the ways South Asian queers have been rendered illegible from almost all forms of representation. Khurana and Murgai's *Julpari* begins to fill that void by offering one depiction of a South Asian diasporic queer community. Indeed, SALGA's film succeeds in portraying the ways desi queers refigure notions of family and community to account for their exiled subjectivity within mainstream spheres.

However, when Saleem happily recounts, “the whole SALGA gang was there” on their trip to the Jewish village, one must wonder who is being systematically elided even there. Where are SALGA's lesbians and drag kings, and why were they denied representation in *Julpari*? Where do the closeted second-generational SALGA members fit in? The bisexuals and transsexuals? And what about class, religious, caste, migrant and intra-ethnic inequities and allegiances? In critically evaluating

this film, I have wondered to whom and for whom *Julpari* and SALGA hope to speak.

Ultimately, these final questions may further the construction of and the discourse on the non-dominant, minoritarian communities discussed in these pages. It remains critical to consider who is written into these communities and who is simultaneously written out – thereby excised from the small repository of existing desi queer representation. Indeed, the impetus for this paper rests in the fact that South Asian queers are not well-represented in terms of visible cultural or academic production and their presence at the intersections of postcolonial and sexuality studies is still being worked out.

The desi progressive community needs more works like *Julpari* that will complicate the cinematic representations of our lives as South Asian diasporic people living in the U.S. These types of cultural works demand special attention to the ways we are positioned within and sometimes outside of discourse and representation. Muñoz's last words in his text speak to the larger project in which these South Asian queer films are involved. He writes simply: “our charge as spectators and actors is to continue disidentifying with this world until we achieve new ones” (200). The desi queers portrayed in *Julpari* are truly working within and beyond parameters of an unfinished project that seeks to imagine an egalitarian world where desi drag performance addresses and redresses a profound cultural critique that is more than life ... and far more than eight-inch heels.

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### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The word *desi* refers to people who claim South Asian ancestry – including (but not limited to) Pakistanis, Indians, Sri Lankans, and Bangladeshis. While useful to politicize the term *desi* in order to reference the South Asian diaspora – it is important to critique the North Indian linguistic hegemony encoded in the term (it means "of country" in Sanskrit-based languages)– making it a term that is especially difficult to embrace by South Indians, or non-Indian South Asians.

<sup>2</sup> Notice here how this film was gendered. Representations of U.S. South Asian lesbianism or queer female to male drag are limited in *Julpari*. Indeed, claiming to address "desi queerness" at large without dealing with the gendered specificities of female queerness and drag performance would be unproductive and a disservice to the South Asian lesbian community – which, in addition to racism and homophobia, must also confront the sexist patriarchy of their own queer of color community. Thus, for the purpose of this essay, unless otherwise noted, "South Asian queers" will mainly speak for *desi* queer male to female drag performers.

<sup>3</sup> Through my reading of *Julpari*, I take as a given the fact that queer studies and postcolonial/ethnic studies have insufficiently investigated the ways sexuality and ethnicity impact each other in identity formation. See Jasbir Puar (1998), Martin Manalansan (2003) and José Muñoz (1999) for further discussion on the ways scholarship on queers of color importantly intervenes in the discrete disciplinary regimes that limit queer and ethnic studies, respectively.

<sup>4</sup> See Prashad (2001) for a lucid critique of South Asian American history and political organizing in the U.S.

<sup>5</sup> I don't mean to suggest here that groups like SALGA are automatically progressive or homogeneous. Indeed, some of these groups have vigorous internal struggles around racism, sexism and other issues that so-called "progressive" organizations encounter through their activism. By "progressive," I hope to index organizations and cultural production that organize around, and thus acknowledge, the multiple, intersecting sites of oppression impacting their community and those with which they share solidarity.

<sup>6</sup> References to *Julpari* assume citation to Swati Khurana and Leith Murgai's *Khuragai Production*, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Muñoz's theory became useful to me in drafting this paper as I struggled to reconcile a perceived uncritical appropriation of the white beauty aesthetic of femininity by the desi drag queens in their performances. The conversation that unfolds here will hopefully unpack this dilemma further, clarifying how Muñoz's approach to drags of color performance helps to displace this tension.

<sup>8</sup> See Mark Johnson's *Beauty and Power* for his work on the gay/bantut in the Southern Philippines for further elaboration.

<sup>9</sup> This statement should not be read as suggesting that the repression of ethnic minorities, including Muslim, Arab and South Asian Americans is a new phenomenon post-9/11. Indeed, there is a long history of racialization of these groups in the U.S. and the "post-9/11" phrase certainly overdetermines the break from a previous period. My intention here is simply to notice the fact that specific racial and sexual discourses over the past three years have increased the production of a certain kind of racialized, sexualized subject as "terrorist."

<sup>10</sup> I'm thinking specifically here about how two distinct discourses have coalesced against immigrant queers of color. Notice how the 2004 presidential election was seen in the media as a referendum on "the war on terror" (e.g. increased surveillance/racial profiling, INS deportations and imprisonment of immigrant men) AND calls for "family values" (anti-gay marriage ballot initiatives, proposed homophobic federal legislation, denial of legal immigration status and services to HIV + immigrants, etc.). The combination of these racist, homophobic and xenophobic practices and proposals present specific challenges for immigrants queers of color. See Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai (2002) for further discussion.



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Ronak K. Kapadia is a performer, writer and graduating senior at Stanford. He receives his degree, with honors, in Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity this June. He has been invited to present his research on campus and at conferences in Los Angeles, Miami, and Austin, Texas. Coupled with fieldwork experience in New York and New Delhi, Ronak has curated events for the Black Box Theater in Oakland and has acted in numerous plays at the college and regional level. Currently, he is working on a full-length solo performance piece entitled "Terrorist Fag Drag and the Wild, Wild West," a satire on post-9/11 racialization of U.S. Arab and South Asian communities. After graduation, Ronak will be in New York pursuing the Tom Ford Fellowship before enrolling in the doctoral program in the Department of Performance Studies at NYU'S Tisch School for the Arts.